Mitra 1 Notes

. Grounded in a sociocultural perspective,

this article provides some of the first empirical data on youth participation in student

voice efforts by identifying how student voice opportunities appear to contribute to

"youth development" outcomes in young people. The article finds that student voice

activities can create meaningful experiences for youth that help to meet fundamental

developmental needs -especially for students who otherwise do not find meaning in

their school experiences. Specifically, this research finds a marked consistency in the

growth of agency, belonging and competence-three assets that are central to youth

development.

While many high schools have struggled with how to improve student

outcomes, few high schools have decided to go straight to the source and

ask the students. In the past few years, the term "student voice" increasingly

has been discussed in the school reform literature as a potential

avenue for improving both student outcomes and school restructuring

(including Carbonaro & Gamoran, 2002; Fielding, 2002; Mitra, 2003a;

Rudduck & Flutter, 2000). The term has gained increasing credence as a

construct that describes the many ways in which youth might have the

opportunity to actively participate in school decisions that will shape their

lives and the lives of their peers (Fielding, 2001; Goodwillie, 1993; Levin,

2000). When placed into practice, "student voice" can consist on the most

basic level of youth sharing their opinions of problems and potential

solutions. It could also entail young people collaborating with adults to

actually address the problems in their schools.

During this time when student voice remained mostly silent in schools,

many adolescents experienced increasing alienation as a result of large school

and class sizes, segregation by age and ability that can prevent students from

learning from more experienced peers, and a view of students as clients that

is often perpetuated throughout school decision making and thereby

increases the distance between teachers and students (Costello, Toles,

Spielberger, & Wynn, 2000; Nieto, 1994; Pittman & Wright, 1991; Soohoo,

1993). Students report that adults in their schools rarely listen to their views,

nor do they involve students in important decisions affecting their own

activities or work (Noddings, 1992; Poplin & Weeres, 1992).

These

systemic problems can contribute to youth disengaging from school and lead

to increasing numbers of students who cut classes, have lower self-concepts,

achieve less academically, and drop out of school (Fullan, 2001; Rudduck,

Day, & Wallace, 1997).

but instead it has focused on the notion that student outcomes will improve

and school reform will be more successful if students actively participate in

shaping it. In its present form, student voice activities range from schools

gathering information from students through focus groups and surveys to

students working alongside teachers to develop and implement strategies

for school improvement.

The existing research suggests that this new form of student voice has

served as a catalyst for change in schools, including helping to improve

teaching, curriculum, and teacher-student relationships and leading to

changes in student assessment and teacher training (Fielding, 2001; Mitra,

2003; Oldfather, 1995; Rudduck & Flutter, 2000). Partnering with students

to identify school problems and possible solutions reminds teachers and

administrators that students possess unique knowledge and perspectives

The Significance of Students 653

about their schools that adults cannot fully replicate (Kushman, 1997; Levin,

2000; Mitra, 2001; Rudduck, Day, & Wallace, 1997; Thorkildsen, 1994).

By

involving students-and particularly students failing subjects or rarely

attending school-school personnel cannot easily shift the blame of failure

onto the students. Instead they must assess the problems within the school's

structure and culture (Fine, 1991; Mitra, 2003; Wehlage, Rutter, Smith,

Lesko, & Fernandez, 1989).

. Students who had been sullen and

unreachable became some of the most passionate participants in the school

reform process once they became involved (Earl & Lee, 2000; Lee &

Zimmerman, 2001).

Most research instead has looked at efforts to increase student voice and

agency at the classroom level. These studies have found that students

improved academically when teachers construct their dassrooms in ways that

value student voice-especially when students are given the power to work

with their teachers to improve curriculum and instruction (Oldfather, 1995;

Rudduck & Flutter, 2000).

Student voice opportunities helped young

people to gain a stronger sense of their own abilities, and built student

awareness that they can make changes in their schools, not only for themselves

but also for others (Oldfather, 1995). Increasing student voice in classrooms

also improved students' understanding of how they learn. Other research

similarly found that by articulating how they learn best, students also can help

teachers do a better job of meeting student needs (Johnston & Nicholls, 1995).

small set of studies that look at increasing student agency within the

classroom (e.g., Arnot & Reay, 2001; Oldfather, 1995; Rudduck & Flutter,

This article focuses on school change efforts in which youth and adults

working together on shared activities. The study has its roots in sociocultural

(Rogoff, 1990) and situative (Greeno & MMAP, 1998; Lave, 1988; Lave &

Wenger, 1991) perspectives, which premise that we learn and become who

we are through interaction with others. The article is premised on the

concept that learning is inherently a social activity that occurs between

people rather than just as an individual process

Experienced members assist novice colleagues so that the

less experienced members move beyond their current capabilities to learn

new tasks and acquire more sophisticated skills (Vygotsky, 1978).

). Specifically,

student voice activities can increase specific youth development needs,

including providing opportunities to influence issues that matter to them

(Costello, Toles, Spielberger, & Wynn, 2000; Pittman, Irby & Ferber, 2000);

to engage in actively solving problems (Fielding, 2001; Goodwillie, 1993;

Takanishi, 1993); to develop closer and more intimate connection with

adults and with peers (McLaughlin, 1999; Pittman & Wright, 1991;

Takanishi, 1993); to assume more active classroom roles (Costello, Toles,

Spielberger, & Wynn, 2000); and to increase their sense of agency and voice

. Referred to informally by some youth

development researchers and advocates as the "ABC's" of youth development

(Carver, 1997), the choice of using the concepts "agency, belonging

and competence"

Research in developmental psychology finds agency, belonging and

competence to be necessary factors for adolescents to remain motivated in

school and to achieve academic success (Eccles, Midgley, Wigfield,

Buchanan, et al., 1993; Goodenow, 1993; Roeser, Midgley, & Urdan,

1996; Stinson, 1993). The youth development field does not possess a

similar types of capacities, including "autonomy, belonging, and competence"

(Schapps, Watson, & Lewis, 1997); "self-worth, belonging and

competence" (Kernaleguen, 1980); "knowledge, belonging and competence"

(Villarruel & Lerner 1994); "navigation, connection and productivity"

(Connell, Gambone & Smith, 2000); and "confidence and compassion;

connection and caring; competence and character" (National Research

Council, 2002; Roth & Brooks-Gunn 2000).

The research sample is based on representativeness of

the concept of student voice (Strauss & Corbin, 1990),

After conducting a small sample of interviews and

observations with other schools and after talking with school reform

consultants in the area, it was clear however that although these other

schools indicated an interest in increasing student voice, it was not

occurring at these schools at the time. The student voice effort happening

at Whitman was unusual and deserved to be the sole focus of this study.

Student Forum focused its efforts at the organizational level

by seeking student participation in efforts to reform the school and to

institute new school programs and policies. The group sought to inject

student voice into school decision making and to seek ways to make the

school a better place for all students. The group eventually narrowed its

focus to one schoolwide issue-building communication and partnership

schoolwide between students and teachers.

grounded theory analysis using grounded theory (Glaser & Strauss, 1967;

Strauss & Corbin, 1990), which is a qualitative methodology that provides a

process for developing theory that is derived from data that is systematically

gathered.9 Grounded theory is especially useful since it focuses on moving

beyond description to developing theory by making connections, defining

relationships, and looking for patterns of action between concepts derived

from the data. Moving from raw data to conclusions involved a process of

"data reduction" that involved breaking data down, conceptualizing it, and

putting it back together in thematic categories that best fit the text (Miles &

Huberman, 1994).1o

, I observed that youth who participated in

efforts to increase student voice showed evidence of marked increases in the

very personal and social assets that youth development researchers assert

are necessary for students to succeed in society. In particular, I noticed a

strong increase in agency, belonging, and competence across the youth

participating in student voice efforts at Whitman. This parsimonious set of

attributes concisely described the ways in which the participating students

had changed and the aspects that young people valued the most from their

work in the two groups.

Youth Development Asset Ways That Student Voice Increases This Asset

Agency \* Increasing ability to articulate opinions to others

\* Constructing new identities as change makers

\* Developing a greater sense of leadership

Belonging \* Developing a relationship with a caring adult

\* Improving interactions with teachers

\* Increasing attachment to the school

Competence \* Critiquing their environment

\* Developing problem solving and facilitation skills

\* Getting along with others

\* Speaking publicly

AGENCY

Agency in a youth development context indicates the ability to exert

influence and power in a given situation. It connotes a sense of confidence,

a sense of self-worth, and the belief that one can do something, whether

contributing to society writ large or to a specific situation (Heath &

McLaughlin, 1993). The data in this section indicate that students in both

groups demonstrated a growth of agency in three ways: (1) they articulated

their opinions and felt that their views were heard; (2) they constructed new

roles as change makers in the school who could "make a difference"; and

(3) they developed leadership, including an increasing sense of responsibility

to help others in need.

BEING HEARD AND SPEAKING UP

In activities with a focus on student voice, a sense of agency particularly

focuses on the notion that youth ideas are to be heard and respected

(Costello, Toles, Spielberger, & Wynn, 2000). Student Forum member Sala

The students developed a greater sense of self worth when they

felt that people were listening to their perspectives.

Survey data affirm that all

Whitman students, including Student Forum, believed that student-teacher

relations were in desperate need of repair (p = .62 for Student-Teacher

Respect, indicating that Student Forum shared the same sentiments as the

broader student population on this issue). Thus, Student Forum focused its

work on building partnerships between students and teachers. Their

strategy for accomplishing this involved students participating in "teacherdriven"

activities such as the focus groups. The group also developed

"student-driven" activities to help teachers to gain a better understanding

of student perspectives. 1'

Student Forum youth also increased their sense of being heard as they

noticed that teachers and other adults in authority positions respected their

opinions and listened to what they believed during the student-driven

activities.

." Student Forum members observed an increasing

willingness to collaborate with students and a deeper growth in teacher

understanding and receptiveness of student perspectives. Student Forum

members and teachers also observed that the student-focused activities

helped to reduce tension between teachers and students, to increase

informality, and to help teacher and students to identify one another as

persons rather than as stereotypes.

Student Forum members' emphasis on others

hearing them, PSC members spoke of an internal sense of feeling more

confident to speak up and to speak out. PSC students' growing development

of agency grew from within as they felt more self-assured and brave enough

to express their beliefs.

Most often schools reinforce preconceived expectations of youth and sort

them into categories (Giroux, 1983). Based on these labels, students

develop a sense of self. For example, students slotted as "burnouts" in

Eckert's (1989) famous study develop an identity based on marginalization

and a lack of agency. Student Forum and PSC provided opportunities for

youth to develop positive forms of identification that are normally

unavailable to youth in a school setting. Specifically, youth in both groups

developed new identities as change makers.

An increase in agency among group members also leads to efficacy. The

group members articulated an ability to define new roles for themselves as

they pushed the school to redefine itself.

Youth need to practice and to assume leadership roles to prepare for adult

responsibilities (Connell, Gambone, & Smith, 1998). Leadership developed

in PSC and Student Forum members as they learned how to take

responsibility for their group and how to guide others. Student Forum

members increased their ability to communicate the vision of the groups

and to help run the organization. Adults who worked with Student Forum

members particularly noticed a growing confidence and leadership in the

students involved. Adult advisor Amy Jackson commented, "Well, [I've

These student leaders learned how

to encourage the work of others to ensure that the group completed its

tasks and they helped to maintain the vision of the group by reminding

their fellow members of the group's purpose and by keeping spirits

high. They noticed that their roles in the groups helped them to feel

more comfortable giving assistance to others

After Mark became a leader in the PSC, he became a resource for his

fellow students, who felt comfortable asking him questions since they felt

that he understood them and would be willing to help them out.

BELONGING

The concept of belonging in a youth development frame consists of

developing relationships consisting of supportive, positive interaction with

adults and peers and of opportunities to learn from one another (Costello,

Toles, Spielberger, & Wynn, 2000; Heath & McLaughlin, 1993; Pittman &

Wright, 1991). Since youth tend to spend most of their time with peers and

relatively little time in formal or informal socialization or interactions with

adults, opportunities to develop meaningful relationships with adults have

become an increasingly important need for adolescents (Csikszentmihalyi &

Larson, 1984). When students believe that they are valued for their

perspectives and respected, they begin to develop a sense of ownership and

attachment to the organization in which they are involved (Atweh & Burton,

1995). Scholars have found that an adolescent's belonging to her school is

positively related to academic success and motivation (Goodenow, 1993;

Roeser, Midgley, & Urdan, 1996; Ryan & Powelson, 1991).

Specifically, youth developed (1) greater connections to caring adults; (2)

greater connections to teachers in general; and (3) greater connections to

the school. When comparing PSC and Student Forum members' shifts in

Building connections with adults encourages healthy adolescent development

(Kushman, 1997; Moore, 1997). Students in both the groups realized

mentoring relationship with all of the students who joined the group. He

served as a resource and support mechanism for PSC students who

otherwise did not have many sources of information. He counseled students

on choosing courses, applying to college and acquiring financial aid. Isabel

Student Forum members noticed a greater give and take between teachers

and students so that they mutually understood each other and could take

action to change the school. Joey Sampson explained, "I think the teachers

Both felt comfortable speaking to teachers in the hallway

and approaching them if they had a concern in class:

Members in both groups displayed a final form of belonging that increased

their connection to the school itself. This connection is critical to adolescent

outcomes because of the links between the literature on school belonging

and academic success. Research indicates that students who are more

674 Teachers College Record

behaviorally engaged in school have greater academic success, regardless of

their at-risk status (Damico & Roth, 1991; Fine, 1993; Johnson, 1991).

While this study cannot prove a difference in academic success of students

in the groups, the data on belonging do indicate the first step in students

becoming more attached to school. Rosalinda Gutierrez from Student

PSC also provided an incentive to improve academically. Rita Ruiz found

that participating in PSC gave her a reason to keep her grades up and come

to school. She explained, "I used to have a bad attitude against everyone.

Competence in a youth development context consists of the need for youth

to develop new skills and abilities, to actively solve problems, and to be

appreciated for one's talents (Goodwillie, 1993; Takanishi, 1993; Villarruel

& Lerner 1994). By assuming responsibilities in Student Forum and PSC

and enacting decisions that have consequences for themselves and others,

the data in this section demonstrate that participating students developed a

broad set of competencies that helped them prepare for adulthood. The

data in this section describe how youth experienced marked growth in four

specific competencies: (1) critiquing the environment; (2) problem solving

676 Teachers College Record

and facilitation skills to keep an organization focused and moving forward;

(3) cooperating and negotiating with others; and (4) speaking publicly

Efforts to increase student voice can create meaningful experiences that

help to meet the developmental needs of youth-and particularly for those

students who otherwise would not find meaning in their school experiences.

Participating in these groups helped (1) to instill agency in students,

or belief that they could transform themselves and the institutions that

affect them, (2) to acquire the skills and competencies to work toward these

changes, and (3) to establish meaningful relationships with adults and the

peers that create greater connections to each other.

In other words, the youth most

involved in the groups demonstrated stronger agency, a tighter-knit

description of belonging to the group, and a more profound growth in

competencies than youth who participated in the groups less often.

. In a time when practitioners face growing pressure to emphasize

standardized testing, the youth development frame provides an additional

way to identify important skills and assets that youth need to learn to

prepare themselves for the future and to navigate through current

situations in their lives

The data further indicate that how we structure student voice efforts

greatly influences the ways in which youth development occurs.

, through an increase in

682 Teachers College Record

pride and confidence, a more one-on-one form of building connections

with adults, and a new set of skills focused on increasing communication

with others

A key component of the structure of student voice activities is the

relationship between the youth and adults who are working together on

these endeavors. My colleagues and I have discussed previously the

dilemma of adult advisors learning how to balance support for youth with

the need to create space for young people to take on meaningful roles and

responsibilities (Kirshner, 2003; Mitra, 2003b; O'Donoghue & Stroebel,

2.003). When adults did not strike a balance between support and letting go,